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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1523

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SUBJECT: MENON CAUTIOUS AND ADVANI SKEPTICAL ABOUT NUCLEAR
MOVEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador David Mulford for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon told the Ambassador May 1 that the Indian government would seek approval to submit the safeguards agreement to the IAEA in the May 6 UPA-Left committee meeting. Although he did not divulge any specifics, Menon believed that External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's proposal to have a "sense of the House" in Parliament at a later date gives political space that might allow movement forward. In a separate May 1 meeting, BJP Prime Ministerial candidate L.K. Advani surmised to Acting Polcouns that the government would continue delaying implementation of the nuclear deal in order to ensure that the Communists remain supportive of a Congress Party-led coalition government after the general elections in early 2009. End Summary.

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UPA Will Push Committee for a Decision
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¶2. (C) In a May 1 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon divulged that the UPA government

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has prepared the ground to move the nuclear initiative forward. "We have clearly told them that we want a decision that we will go to the Board," he related. The Ambassador asked about the proposal put forward by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to ask for a "sense of the house" from Parliament at some point in the nuclear timeline. Menon explained that the details remain vague, but the idea would provide more political space, particularly for the BJP. He observed that former BJP National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra has explicitly and publicly supported the initiative. Moreover, he continued, BJP Prime Ministerial candidate L.K. Advani has narrowed the opposition's argument against the initiative to the one issue of testing.

¶3. (C) The sense of the house itself would not entail a vote, Menon explained, but rather a debate followed by a general statement expressing the sense of Parliament. He called the idea a "political figleaf or gesture," and made clear that Parliament has no legal role in crafting foreign policy. The Ambassador asked whether he felt optimistic about the May 6 meeting. Menon hedged, and quipped that he "tries not to count my chickens before they hatch." He observed that the nuclear debate no longer involves the actual issues, but rather the political climate. He wondered how the May

panchayat (local assembly) elections in West Bengal and the April 30 conclusion of budget would factor into the Communists' decision of whether to break with the government now or later. "If the Left backs off enough, we will go ahead," he stated.

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Advani Expects No Nuclear Resolution
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¶4. (C) As part of a separate May 1 meeting, BJP Prime Ministerial candidate and former Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani told Acting Polcouns that he has heard that Congress Party politicians would stall or kill implementation of the nuclear initiative so as not to alienate the Communists, whose support is essential for a future Congress Party-led coalition government after the next general elections, which he expected to occur in early 2009.

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Comment: Ground Laid for May 6
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¶5. (C) Short of jettisoning the Communists from government, the Congress Party can do little more to set the stage for forward nuclear movement. Ahmadinejad's visit demonstrated an "independent foreign policy" and Mukherjee proposed an enhanced role for Parliament, actions which might inveigle the Left to back down or delay their stalling tactics. However, as Menon admitted and Advani assessed, enacting the initiative now depends on the political whims of the Congress Party and Communists, whose short-term vote calculations override all other concerns, including India's national interest.

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